DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 380 699 CE 068 694

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TITLE Guidelines for Planning Action Research Projects. Research to Practice.
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SPONS AGENCY Department of Education, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Oct 94
NOTE 5p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Action Research; Adult Basic Education; *Adult Literacy; Data Analysis; Data Collection; *Educational Research; Ethics; Guidelines; Information Dissemination; *Reading Research; *Research Design; *Research Methodology; Theory Practice Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Teacher Researchers

ABSTRACT

This paper, which is intended to assist adult literacy practitioners interested in conducting research about their programs, discusses the four stages of the action research process: identifying questions to guide the research, collecting information to answer the questions, analyzing the information collected, and sharing the results with others. The section on identifying the research question emphasizes the importance of selecting a question that is important, directly related to the issue or problem being investigated, and answerable. Discussed in the section about data collection are the following: the importance of using more than one strategy or source of information; the benefits of focusing on readily available information, the need to consider all possible data sources, including demographic information, surveys, test results, observations, interviews, conversations, and documents ranging from attendance/test records to student journals; and the importance of research ethics. The concepts of redundancy and data saturation are discussed, and data analysis procedures are outlined. Available avenues for sharing research findings are listed. The concluding section emphasizes the value of research conducted by literacy practitioners. (MN)

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039-0200-0008
OCTOBER 1994

Ohio Literacy Resource Center

Enhancing adult literacy in the State of Ohio

Research To Practice

ED 380 699

Guidelines for Planning Action Research Projects

by Nancy Padak and Gary Padak

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Although research frequently focuses somehow on new ideas in adult literacy programs or instruction, the research process involves more than simply trying them out. "Trying out" frequently involves trial-and-error; research, on the other hand, is planned and systematic inquiry based on one or more questions related to the new ideas. Our purpose in this brief paper is to provide guidance for adult literacy practitioners who are interested in conducting research about their programs.

We will comment briefly about each of four stages of the research process:

1. Identifying questions to guide the research
2. Collecting information to answer the questions
3. Analyzing the information that has been collected
4. Sharing results with others.

IDENTIFY THE QUESTION

What makes a good research question? We think there are probably three major characteristics.

First, the issue you have chosen to explore must be important--to you, to your program, to your students. In most cases, the issue will either be a problem that needs to be solved or something new in the program that needs to be evaluated. In either event, the "important" criterion applies. After all, research involves some extra time and effort. It makes no sense to devote time and exert effort to work on something that is not important.

A second quality of good research questions is that they are directly related to the issue or problem that you have chosen to explore. If you develop more than one question, each needs to be related to the others, and together they need to be related to the overall issue or problem. Especially if the issue you have chosen to focus upon is

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complex, this may mean thinking about a long-term project that focuses on a few related questions each year, so that eventually the entire issue or problem can be addressed. A project currently underway in Cleveland's Even Start program is a good example of this long-term planning. The overall issue of interest relates to the impact of field trips (e.g., to museums, zoos) on families' literacy abilities, attitudes, and practices. Of course this is an enormous issue, far more than can be addressed in one year, so Cleveland personnel have adopted a "first things first" attitude. Each year, they frame one or two questions related to the overall issue; they know that over time, their larger question will be answered.

A third characteristic of good research questions is that they are answerable. To some extent, this criterion relates to the "largeness" issue described above. But it also has to do with the type of information that is available to you. For example, it would be very hard to study either program graduates or program drop-outs if program participants frequently move or have their phones disconnected.

A good way to develop answerable questions is to brainstorm about the larger problem or issue. You can ask, "What intrigues me?" or "What do I want to know more about?" Rule out "yes or no" questions. Good questions usually begin with "why," "how," or "what." We recommend that you pose your questions so that the answers will be based on descriptions or observations.

COLLECT THE DATA

Any information that can help you answer your questions is data.

"Good" data are directly related to the questions; that is, they provide direct answers. We recommend that you use more than one strategy or source of information for each question because this helps to ensure that the results will be valid. For example, suppose you were interested in adults' attitudes about reading. You could certainly ask them questions, but you would probably want to observe their in-class behaviors as well. If answers to your interview questions match the picture you see from observation, you can be more certain that you have answered your question adequately.

We also recommend that you look for readily available information that can serve as data to answer your questions. This is not only efficient, but it also lends validity to the findings. For example, if you wish to explore changes in learners' writing ability, you could administer a series of standardized tests, but this would involve time away from instruction, as well as additional cost, and the tests might not focus upon your particular interests. A better alternative might be to think about the types of writing learners do in your program and then select writing samples for analysis. No time is taken from instruction, no extra cost is involved, and the samples are likely to match your interests exactly.

As is apparent from the above, data can come from almost anywhere. Tallies (e.g., lists of books read) can be data, demographic information can be data, surveys can be data, and test results can be data. Observations, interviews, and documents can also be data. For example, you may observe learners in action as they work with a new curriculum. If you record your observations somehow and keep track of them over time, they could help you determine the impact of the new curriculum. Remembering what you have seen is the hardest part of using observations as data. Consequently, you will either need to keep a daily journal or make and save on-the-spot notes about your observations.

Interviews or conversations with groups or individuals are another good source of data. These can be either planned or spontaneous. In addition, you can either develop questions beforehand or simply invite conversation about an issue. In any event, you will need to decide how you will remember what people have said. If you decide to take notes, try to make them as complete as possible and reread them immediately so that you can add your own insights and any missing information. You can also tape record interviews or conversations and then later make notes from the tapes or transcribe them word-for-word.

Finally, documents can be data. You might collect student journals or other examples of their writing. You might collect attendance information, test scores, or anything else that already exists and might help to answer your questions.

Research ethics must be considered as projects are planned and data are collected. If you seek information from or about your students, you need to first seek their permission to use the information. Because students are adults, this usually involves simply explaining that you are doing a research project, describing the information you want to use, underscoring that their participation is voluntary, and promising confidentiality--that you will not use the person's actual name or any other identifying information in reports of the project. If you have any questions about ethical research practices, feel free to contact us at the OLRC.

ANALYZE THE DATA

You will know that you have gathered enough information when new data bring no surprises.

Researchers call this "redundancy" or "data saturation." In practical terms, when you are no longer learning anything new about your questions, it's time to stop collecting and start analyzing.

Data analysis involves examination of the data in order answer your questions. To prepare, you will want to make sure all your data are on paper, and you will probably want to read everything over at least once. If you have asked more than one question, you will want to sort the data according to question. And you may want to discard (or at least set aside) data that do not directly relate to the questions you have posed.

In most cases, analysis involves creating categories or themes or "types of." One way to find these is to sort data into piles such that each pile shares some broader characteristic. You can then write a summary that captures the essence of each broader characteristic. Together, these summaries should answer your questions.

SHARE THE FINDINGS

Research can lead to more research, as in the case of the Cleveland Even Start project described above.

Or research can suggest refinements in programs or practices. Or research results can lead to more questions about the problem or issue under study. In any event, the last stage of the research process is to share your findings with others. Lots of this sharing will be informal--planned or spontaneous conversations or discussions. But more formal sharing is also important.

You can write about your research, with or without assistance from OLRC staff. Writing serves at least two critical purposes. First, as we write, additional insights often occur to us. So in a way, the act of writing can lead to further analysis or interpretation. And second, writing leaves a permanent record of the research that can be used by others in your program or throughout the state. Additionally, current or potential funders for your program will probably be interested in the results.

You can also make presentations about your research at program meetings, before community groups, or at state or national professional meetings. Whether you share through writing or speaking, this final stage in the research process is important because others can benefit and learn from your project.

CONCLUSION

Some people have preconceived and negative notions about their ability to do research and about the usefulness of research for improving adult literacy programs and practices.

They think that the research process is difficult and highly technical; they feel unqualified to engage in this sort of scientific endeavor. And they wouldn't even want to because they believe that researchers are sterile and esoteric with little to offer those in the "real world."

It doesn't have to be that way. The research process is basically the inquiry process--posing questions and searching systematically for their answers. This type of research is pertinent to issues facing you as an adult literacy practitioner and to your colleagues throughout the state. This type of research can enable you to explore issues or problems, and it can also serve as a model for evaluating learners, curriculum, or some aspect of program delivery. It has everything to offer those in the "real world."

Staff at the OLRC can help you with any aspect of a research project that you wish to undertake. Feel free to contact us.

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